

# The Mystery of Healing in the Church

*an address to the Order of Saint Luke, S. Matthew's Church, Taita, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2005*

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It was with pleasure that I accepted the invitation to speak to you this evening on a topic which I think is at the very heart of Christianity – Healing. I must apologise however, as I can only provide a very brief introduction to this vast topic.

Your Order takes seriously the command given to us by Our Lord to heal the sick. You have your genesis in the mid-twentieth century when the founders of the Order “*shared a dream of drawing all those involved in the healing ministry under the umbrella of a world Christian healing fellowship based on the four Gospels of Jesus Christ*”<sup>2</sup>. It is interesting to note that your Order was founded at about the same time that Francis MacNutt was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest - his ministry has many points in common with yours, though from a slightly different starting point.

Francis MacNutt's recent book<sup>3</sup> I think goes some of the way to explain the phenomena seen in the last half of this past century. However, in common with much that has been written in the past fifty years or so, Dr MacNutt skims over the Church and in doing so misses much.

This is not surprising as we who are raised in the West see things from our perspective.



*Figure 1: What do you see?<sup>4</sup>*

For some, figure one above will be familiar and will remind them about how we perceive the world. There are often two points of view. Both may be equally valid, but once we have our

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2 <http://www.orderofstluke.org/about.htm>

3 F. MacNutt, “The nearly perfect crime”, 2005.

4 Taken from <http://theliterarylink.com/illusions.html>

mind set on one of them it is very difficult to see the other viewpoint.

What Dr MacNutt, your Order and many others have now observed is that the West stopped practising what the Church had received. However, as with the patient with hypertension, who doesn't know about it until it is measured, it has taken a long time for this to be recognised. Having recognised this it has then been assumed that this is the case everywhere. Fortunately, this is not the case.

The Churches in the West always had differences in one way or another with those in the East. This is all the more obvious with the celebration and participation in the Mysteries of the Church. The Church in the East – what is now known in the West as the Orthodox Church - has at no time given up the usages and practices of the early Church<sup>5</sup>. Which is why I am so pleased to have the opportunity today to discuss this with you and re-acquaint you with a continuous organic link to Christ and the Apostles.

Before we get into the more cerebral part of this presentation. I want to make something quite clear to you all. A key difference between the East and West is the participation of “the laity”. Although the clergy (and in a parish particularly the presbyters - the priests) hold positions of authority, and are highly regarded by the people who they have care over (indeed Bishops are still princes and are crowned), everyone has a role to play in the Church and its services. For example, during the most important and awful moment in the Divine Liturgy everyone implores God that His Holy Spirit descend upon the bread and wine. In all the services of the Church the role of the priest is more as the conductor of the orchestra than a king leading his subjects. In particular all are encouraged to frequently pray for one another and make use of the healing Mysteries of the Church - at the Divine Liturgy just prior to receiving Holy Communion each communicant prays “*and let not this participation in the Holy Mysteries be unto judgement upon me, or unto condemnation, O Lord, but unto the healing of soul and body*”.

What are “the Mysteries” of the Church? In Western terminology the word more often used is the “Sacraments”. The Mysteries have been given to us to heal us in one way or another. But why? And how?

“For God so loved the world that He ...”<sup>6</sup>. One of the most translated passages in the Bible sums it all up. Because God loves us He came to save us, not to condemn us. To do this He has given us the seven Mysteries of the Church<sup>7</sup>. The Mysteries help to reconcile us to Him and heal us. How do they do this? We don't know – it's a mystery. What we do know is that we have to accept Him into our lives and call upon His divine mercy.

*“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me the sinner.”*

This is a well known Orthodox prayer - “The Jesus Prayer” - which is becoming better known in the West. This cry for help is heard many times in the Gospels, for example:

*“And when Jesus departed thence, two blind men followed Him crying and saying, 'Thou Son*

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5 “We preserve the Doctrine of the Lord uncorrupted and firmly adhere to the faith He delivered to us, and keep it free from blemish and diminution, as a Royal Treasure, and a monument of great price, neither adding any thing, nor taking any thing from it.”, *Letter from the Eastern Patriarchs to the Non-Jurors, 1718*, as reproduced in “The Orthodox Church” by Timothy Ware (1997 edition).

6 Jn 3:16-17. All scripture quotations are taken from “The third millenium bible – New Authorized Version (NAV™)”, a complete and unabridged edition of the “Authorized Version” of 1611

7 Baptism, Chrismation (Confirmation in the West), Confession, Holy Unction, Holy Communion, Marriage and Ordination.

*of David, have mercy on us!' ” - Mt 9:27;*

*“And behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same region and cried unto Him, saying 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Thou Son of David! My daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.' ” - Mt 15:22;*

*“And he cried and said 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.' ” - Lk:16:24; and*

*“And they lifted up their voices and said 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' ” - Lk 17:13.*

From these examples, what can we discern?

In three of the the quotations, Christ himself is being addressed and in the quotation from Luke 16 He is telling a story. Where Jesus is addressed he is recognised as being able to do something for the petitioner. Note further that the petitioner is not necessarily the person who needs healing. In Matthew 15:22, the mother is interceding on behalf of her daughter – and her daughter doesn't know about it. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus talks about some one petitioning another person to intercede for him. What is asked for in all these is “mercy”. What is mercy?

The English word “mercy” ultimately comes from a Latin word, *merces*, which was first used in the 6<sup>th</sup> century writings of the Latin Church for “the spiritual reward that comes from kindness to those who do not necessarily have a claim to such mercy and from whom no recompense is to be expected”<sup>8</sup>. The non-ecclesiastical meaning of *merces* also has the connotations of “the price paid for something” or “reward”. It is interesting to note that this non-ecclesiastical meaning partially reflects the nature of the Latin Church's understanding of Christ's sacrifice, an understanding which permeates Western Christian denominations to this day.

What Greek word were the Latin translators of the Bible and other Church teachings attempting to render into Latin?

ΕΛΕΗCON  
(ελέησον - eleison)

This word, eleison, is better translated as “misericordia” (in Latin) and “pity”. But in doing so loses many of the subtle underlying sentiments which the Greek word contains. Eleison does have the sense of “pity” but it also has the sense of “healing” and is related to the Greek word for olive oil, έλαιον – elaiou. Olive oil was used as a medicine and a key aid in healing wounds. Within olive oil is embedded the symbol of the olive tree, the branches of which represent reconciliation<sup>9</sup>.

In the Old Testament<sup>10</sup> oil is frequently mentioned in association with healing and well being. It is also mentioned as being used in raising people to an office, with the oil representing the flowing of the Grace of the Holy Spirit<sup>11</sup>.

8 Encyclopædia Britannica CD-ROM edition 2003

9 “and the dove came to him in the evening, and lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off” - Gn 8:11

10 The early Church, and the Orthodox Church to this day, used the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. All the Old Testament quotations in the New Testament are from the Septuagint rather than the Masoretic text (it did not exist when the New Testament was written).

11 “I have found David My servant: with My holy oil have I annointed him” - Ps 89:20

“and oil to make his face shine” - Ps 104:15

“and like oil unto his bones” - Ps 109:18

So what is Divine mercy? The one answer I prefer (and there are several), is the expression of His Divine love which heals us, reconciles us to Him and through our feeble efforts in conjunction with His ultimately forms us in His image as His children – *theosis*. But to get to that point we need to know Him, accept Him and follow Christ's example.

In the New Testament we are told that Jesus instructed his disciples. What did He teach them? What did they do?

We find the answers to these questions in the Gospels, the Epistles and the practices of the Church from Apostolic times. In particular, concerning healing, we know that part of what he taught them was to anoint the sick, “and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them” (και ήλειφον έλαιώ πολλούς άρρώστους και έθεράπευον - Mk 6:12). Christ commanded his followers to love one another “*A new commandment I give unto you: that ye love (άγαπατε) one another, as I have loved you, that ye also love one another*” (Jn 13:34). But not just our friends our enemies, for example, “*But I say unto you that hear: Love (άγαπατε) your enemies, do good to them that hate you*” (Lk 6:27). Moreover Jesus asked us to pray for our enemies, “*Bless them that curse you and pray for them that despitefully use you*” (Lk 6:28). Logically, if we are to pray for our enemies and we have been commanded to love one another, we should pray for our friends!

Putting this altogether we see these teachings in the Mysteries of the Church. In particular, the Mystery of Holy Unction expresses these teachings as they are summed up by Saint James, “*Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders (presbyters - πρεσβυτέρους) of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord*” (Jm 5:14).

Understood in its widest context that “healing” is a part of being “saved”, then all the Mysteries of the Church need to be considered, as they are all “part of the package”. However, as we are somewhat constrained I will focus briefly on those which most directly concern healing: Baptism, Confirmation, Confession, Holy Unction and Holy Communion.

Following Jesus' commandment<sup>12</sup> we join ourselves to him in Baptism. We are washed clean and become newborn, without spot or stain. As part of the Mystery of Baptism, after exorcism (there are several exorcisms, each with with a particular purpose) and just prior to immersion the catechumen is anointed with the “oil of gladness”<sup>13</sup> with the words “*Unto healing of soul and body*” on the first of four sets of anointing.

Straight after Baptism, the newly baptized are confirmed in the Holy Spirit through the Mystery of Chrismation<sup>14</sup>. As in Baptism, the body is anointed in several places. These anointings are with Holy Chrism in the name of the Holy Spirit, whereby the gifts of the Holy Spirit are imparted to the person being anointed. This is to firmly establish the (usually) child on the path to theosis (sanctification) and the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. The words used by the priest for each anointing are “*The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit*”. It is through Chrismation that the new member of the Church formally receives the royal priesthood of Christ and is illumined in the Holy Spirit: “*But ye have an unction<sup>15</sup> from the Holy One, and ye know all things*”, 1 Jn 2:20.

For Christians validly baptised (i.e. in the name of the Trinity and with water), Chrismation is the

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“neither mollified with ointment” - Is 1:6

12 “Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” - Mt 28:19

13 “This is called the 'oil of gladness' because the person baptized is thereby grafted onto the good olive tree, Jesus Christ, having been as it were, a branch wrested from a wild olive tree.” - from Appendix B VI (5) of 'Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church' translated by I Hapgood, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, 1996.

14 From χρίσμα (chrisma) – an anointing

15 The terminology used in Protestant circles would be “an anointing from the Spirit”

Mystery by which they are united to the Church. Indeed, any one who has departed from the Church in some serious manner (e.g. converting to Islam) is often reconciled to it through Chrismation.

Following Baptism and Chrismation, the new member of the Church receives Holy Communion – the precious Body and Blood of Christ. This is the most powerful medicine which the Church can provide as it is in this Mystery that we receive God Himself. All should take Holy Communion as frequently as possible. For those “over the age of reason” this should be after appropriate preparation. Admittedly (and sadly), in practice for many adults this is often not the case.

What is meant by “appropriate preparation”? This is not necessarily full sacramental confession. It can be a short examination of one's conscience and, with contrition, recitation of the prayers of preparation for communion that form part of the Divine Liturgy.

By the Grace<sup>16</sup> of God we pray we are on a path to being sanctified. However, we are human, we have our own wills and it is very hard to listen to that tiny voice and subject our wills to His. As a result, we stray from the path. For many the departures are not too far, but if we take too many side-ways and bye-ways we end up being no where near the “straight and narrow” path. We need to turn again and head back to the right road.

Such a “turning again”, a *metanoia* (μετάνοια), is what confession is all about. It requires the individual to have a change of mind, to think differently - *metanoëo* (μετανοέω), after which there is a difference in behaviour. Through this change a penitent is reconciled to God. For this Jesus knew that many of us would need guides – people who could direct us and assure us that things have been, are being and will be “put right” - and tools. The guides are those he appointed – the Apostles and their successors and the authority he gave them. The tools are His instructions and commands. For healing, we as individuals should focus on repentance and the summary of the law.

The Mystery of Confession (μετάνοια and εξομολογεῖσθαι – exomologisis - are the terms used in the Greek service books) is concerned with repentance and guidance leading to spiritual healing: not just of the individual penitent, but also on those that have been hurt by the penitent. This is followed by a confirmation of forgiveness.

*“Behold my child, Christ standeth here invisibly, and receiveth thy confession: wherefore, be not ashamed, neither be afraid, and conceal thou nothing from me: but tell me, doubting not, all things which thou hast done; and so shalt thou have pardon from our Lord Jesus Christ. Lo, this holy image is before us<sup>17</sup>: and I am but a witness, bearing testimony before him of all things which thou dost say to me. But if thou shalt conceal anything from me, thou shalt have the greater sin. Take heed therefore, lest, having come to the physician, thou depart unhealed.”*

Following a discussion with the priest<sup>18</sup> the confessor will normally provide guidance of a spiritual nature to help the penitent back on the the path. There may be some spiritual labour that the penitent is asked to do as a way of teaching or a means to healing<sup>19</sup>. The confessor then grants absolution following the instruction given by Christ to the Apostles<sup>20</sup>:

*“and I His unworthy priest, through the power given unto me by him, do forgive*

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16 GRACE – God's Riches At Christ's Expense

17 The priest and penitent are in front of an Icon of Christ (either standing or sitting).

18 Although in today's world it is normally a priest who is the confessor, this is not necessarily so. If confession is to someone who does not have the authority to grant absolution, the penitent will then go to a priest for absolution.

19 This should not be confused with the Latin Church's “penance”.

20 “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” Jn 20:23

*and absolve thee from all thy sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”.*

Often, someone is suffering in someway – physically or spiritually – where it is felt that something more than Confession is needed. In such a case we can congregate and pray for the person in need. There are a variety of ways this can be done: in the normal services of the Church (e.g. at the Divine Liturgy), privately, at one of the special intercessory prayer services, and last, but not least following the instructions of Saint James as mentioned earlier. Saint James' instruction though is more than that given in 5:14. The more complete text is from verses 14 through to 16 where we are given instructions to pray for the sick; anoint them; confess our sins one to another and pray for each other *that we may be healed*.

The service of Holy Unction follows Saint James' teaching and is the Mystery which can be called upon at any time by those in need – not just when they are near death. That the Mystery is open to all is demonstrated during Holy Week when all receive the sacrament on Holy Wednesday when Holy Oil is blessed for general use throughout the year. The service on Holy Wednesday is the same as that used for a sick person, but anyone who wishes to be anointed can be. Furthermore, before leaving church all are given some of the oil to take home and put in their medicine cabinets so that they can anoint themselves at home as the need arises.

I have outlined the Holy Unction service at the end of the written version of this talk. In brief however, the service contains prayers of repentance, healing and a thanksgiving for healing. There are seven anointings (when for a sick person) with a specific set of petitions with each anointing. Following the service, the sick person is asked to “*goeth thence, giving thanks unto God*”. If it is felt necessary, the one who is ill should have Confession prior to Holy Unction and follow Holy Unction with Holy Communion. This is akin to taking three separate strong medicines. Healing is guaranteed – but what form it takes is what God wills.

There are a number of other tools available in the Church to aid and assist in healing. Typically these are prayers set aside for specific purposes covering all manner of illnesses and conditions – including spiritual conditions such as possession and curses. These prayers are contained in the “Great Book of Needs”.

In summary all the services and actions in the Church have one purpose – to heal us. The Mysteries of the Church have at the heart of them healing. Some of the services of the Church have a specific healing action in mind. Everyone is expected to partake of the Mysteries as often as they need. We need the Mysteries of the Church to ensure that we stay on the path Christ gave us to become children of God . We should bear in mind Saint Paul's words<sup>21</sup>, constantly praying the Jesus Prayer, asking to be filled with God's loving grace and be healed.



21 “Pray without ceasing” 1Th 5:17. Saint Paul also hints at the use of the Jesus prayer, 1 Cr 14:19

# Appendix: Basic structure of the Holy Unction service

## Outline

- Opening petitions
- Penitential psalm – 51
- Hymns
- Prayer over the Oil (at this point wine is poured into the oil after the pattern of the remedy in the parable of the Good Samaritan)
- Seven anointings which comprise:
  - ◆ an Epistle reading
  - ◆ a Gospel reading
  - ◆ prayer for the person (a) specific to the enumerated anointing and (b) a general prayer said at each anointing
  - ◆ anointing of the person by the presbyter
- Presentation of the Word of God (i.e. a book of the Gospels) to the sick person
- Concluding dismissal prayers

## Outline of prayers for each enumerated anointing

1. Prayer to God invoking the Holy Spirit said on behalf of all the assembly
2. Intercessory prayer of repentance and petitioning for healing and forgiveness
3. Intercessory prayer petitioning for mercy and restoration of perfect health
4. Prayer of confirmation of healing, petition for restoration and thanksgiving for healing
5. Prayer in the singular invoking the promises to the Apostles regarding authority to remit sins. Pardoning the person to be anointed and the petitioning for healing and putting aside the person's past sins.
6. Prayer thanking for healing, asking for forgiveness of sins, interceding for forgiveness of iniquities and failings, hurts against others, both for the sick person and the assembly.
7. Prayer recalling God calling for repentance and granting forgiveness to bring all to Himself.

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